

Ambassador William P. McCormick.
Keynote Speech to Sister Cities Conference.
Te Anau.
Friday 27 April 2007

I have heard people in New Zealand say that they can remember where they were on September 11. We all know the day I am referring to. It marks the worst terrorist attack on the mainland of the United States in its history. It also represents the pinnacle of how bad things can get when people don't understand or won't tolerate one another. Of how bad things can get when seeking peace and understanding is not the objective.

Interestingly it was on another 'September 11' some 48 years earlier; in 1953 that President Dwight D. Eisenhower addressed a White House Summit on Citizen Diplomacy and called for people-to-people exchanges to build peace and understanding.

At that time in history President Eisenhower had every good reason to seek and call for grass roots action - for people from cities in different countries to come to understand each other.

As the supreme allied commander in the Second World War "General" Eisenhower had experienced the catastrophe of the war in Europe first hand. He had seen the devastation that left millions of people displaced and he shared the pain of a whole generation whose dreams of peace were shattered.

By 1953 he had been elected as the 34th President of the United States - on the promise to find an honorable end to the Korean War. To find a peaceful end to the war as quickly as possible was an urgent desire of all the United Nations forces involved.

The conflict on the Korean Peninsular represented a major flash point in the intensifying Cold War.

President Eisenhower was adamant that all nations should strive for peace and understanding with one another to avoid repeating the calamity of international conflict.

It is significant that at the same time that he was dealing with new international alliances like NATO, SEATO and The United Nations at senior government diplomatic levels, he also called for simple down to earth, local, people-to-people exchanges to build international peace and understanding.

As delegates to this conference you have this intention as your heritage.

The sister cities movement has grown from a handful of committees to a grassroots network of 2,500 communities in 134 countries. The countries that you represent

continue at a local level to build the framework for local communities to share their cultures and educational expertise, sporting prowess and entrepreneurs,

I'm from Portland in Oregon where there is a sister city relationship with Guadalajara in Mexico. Now, as United States Ambassador my residence is in Lower Hutt which has four sister city relationships: Xi'an in China; Minoh City in Japan; Taizhou in China; and Tempe, Arizona in the U.S.A.

Tempe is one of the 899 American cities who have affiliations with over 1424 cities in 96 countries around the world.

New Zealand and international delegates here today come with stories of your sister city partnerships. You are all essential participants of the vision, maintenance and expansion of the predominantly voluntary organization.

I applaud your work and your being here to connect with like minded people who want to see the network grow and become even more meaningful.

The establishment and maintenance of effective sister city partnerships leads to a complicated weave of real-life people including officials, local activists, mayors, and overseas partners.

So often it's the efforts of average citizens that promote community links, fostering peace and goodwill around the world. Diplomacy today doesn't happen exclusively among high-level officials, but within thousands of citizen exchanges. Sister city relationships bring people together – the rest becomes positive history.

Predominantly the first and on going successes that cities have to share with one another are their arts and culture, often through artists and performances.

Because of their more entertaining aspects and emotional connections that transcends language barriers, people are fascinated by the sights, and color's and sounds communicated by different cultures.

One of the challenges of effective sister city programs is the maintenance of long term distance relationships. Starting with a fanfare is one thing, but without committed leadership or resources, relationships can be left to decline or stagnate.

Sister City relationships are not 'Summer Loves'.

Like any sort of relationship, if it is neglected its potential will reduce.

Resources such as funding for programs and people to manage them are always going to be a challenge. There is an ever increasing list on the agenda of what local governments are expected to pay for.

Fortunately we are in the beginning of a revolution in communication technology. Messaging is now - more or less - instant, and there is a huge amount of information for those with access to the internet. Knowledge is global.

However sending emails or reading about each other's culture over the internet isn't enough. There is nothing that promotes real understanding as much as real people meeting one another.

Technology can assist this process but I feel should not replace it. Fortunately, to help support visits and exchanges we can now video conference - sharing everything from greetings to in depth education programs. In real time.

I have noticed that (in New Zealand) there is still a way to go before good quality digital video conference facilities are available to the public. This will be a great tool for audience groups in different cities to connect 'face to face' with each other.

One of the best parts of my job (like today) is that I get to travel around the country meeting New Zealanders from all walks of life. On a visit I made last year to Palmerston North I was introduced to the people there who run the sister city program with Missoula, Montana.

I mention Palmerston North as an example of the many, many cities around the world who have successful compatible sister city relationships.

In the Palmerston North Council Chambers they have a "Missoula Room" which I thought was a great way of honoring their American sister city while also keeping the relationship in mind for all the city councilors who use the room for their meetings.

Communication between local business people, city councilors and officials in Misoula is regular and open. Through official and unofficial visits, information is shared about city planning, business incubators, libraries, even swimming pool and street design.

As the sister city relationship matures the benefits move forward with educational exchanges, the door to employment opportunities is opened.

Academic and student exchanges happen regularly. Friendships over time have flourished so there is a network for Palmerston North visitors who experience homestay accommodation.

With the intention of fostering greater international understanding between the United States and other countries, the State Department runs an international visitor program. Embassies around the world invite specialists to come to the United States to learn and share with counterparts.

Last year we were able to invite Simon Ferry, the director of Palmerston North's Centerpoint Theatre, to come to the United States to meet counterparts. Naturally we had to include Missoula.

I said earlier that often it's the efforts of average citizens that promote community links, fostering peace and goodwill around the world.

I suspect many of you here today are the ones in your cities and communities who do the fundraising, the liaison with stakeholders, the administration and all other aspects of essential activity that keeps your sister city partnership alive.

I applaud you. The commitment that is given, often by unpaid volunteers from the community along with local government politicians and specialists, is remarkable. Together you get the best out of your sister city partnerships.

As you meet and exchange ideas over these few precious days together, I trust that you will inspire one another as you share common concerns and that collectively you will nurture the vision of the sister city movement.

We know there is nothing that works quite like people to people contact. You also will benefit from being together - as well as from the awesome scenery and wonderful hospitality that New Zealand and Southland are famous for.

We can relish the new technologies and use developments in communications to further the aims of peace and understanding. We can all be Ambassadors for our countries, providing opportunities for people to connect in peaceful ways.

Inevitably the date September 11 will come around again this year. Almost six years have past since the attacks on New York and Washington and 54 years have passed since the call by President Eisenhower for 'people to people' diplomacy.

No matter how many years pass I suspect we will always need advocates for peace and understanding - between nations and the people of those nations.

Thank you for maintaining the spirit of hope and energy that sister city programs provide.

Thank you for nurturing the legacy of peace and understanding.
